The Camp Logan Story:
The 1917 Camp Logan Mutiny and Houston Riot

by
MSG Edward L. Britt

NCO History Magazine Article
SGM McKinney
23 April 2003

The Camp Logan Story

I. INTRODUCTION:

a. References:

1. Haynes, Robert V. A night of violence; the Houston riot of 1917. c1976
2. Internet: "The History of Jim Crow" 2000
3. Newspaper article, "Camp Logan Mutiny" 1989
4. Newspaper article, "The Camp Logan Story" 1997

b. My research revealed startling details in which a group of "Black Soldiers", lead by the First Sergeant, took the law into their own hands against startled "whites" civilians and police force of Houston, Texas on 23 August 1917. History recorded this event as the only racial riot in America where more whites suffered death than blacks. The formal investigation conducted by the military attributes the immediate cause to the attitude and conduct of white Houstonians, particularly members of the city police, influenced by "Jim Crow", towards the blacks.

II. BODY:

a. 3/24 Infantry assignment to Camp Logan, 1917

1. Hero's welcome
2. 1SG Vida Henry
3. CPL Charles Baltimore

b. Black soldiers in the "Jim Crow" south

c. A night of violence, 23 August 1817

1. The leading events
2. The Mutiny
3. The Riot

d. The Army's reaction

1. The Courts-Martial (Gift Chapel/plaque)

2. The Executions (burial site)

3. Addressing fairness

III. CLOSING:

a. Unforeseen consequences; the headstones, the plaque; the Right

b. Closing statement

The Camp Logan Story

The story begins with the assignment of the 3rd Battalion 24th Infantry to Houston, Texas, in 1917 to guard Camp Logan. The 3/24 Infantry Battalion was one of the Regular Army's Black regiments stationed at Camp Furlong near Columbus, New Mexico. Camp Logan was one of fifteen such camps established for the mobilization of the National Guard at the start of World War I. Many of the 24th officers voiced their concerns of assigning black soldiers duty in the south and requested otherwise. It was no secret to members of either race, military or civilian, black or white, that the use of black guards at Camp Logan would threaten to upset the hard earned racial equilibrium of Houston, Texas. The military, however, was not in a favorable position to give in to these requests and the 24th went to Houston as ordered (Manjuso 10).

The unit had only days returned to Camp Furlong after unsuccessfully chasing Poncho Villa over northern Mexico, as members of the Punitive Expedition with General Pershing, when they learned of this new mission in Houston. Prior to their departure for Houston, the unit suffered serious loses of twenty-five of its seasoned enlisted soldiers to the Colored Officers' Training Camp plus the unexpected departure in June of the battalion sergeant major. The lost included all of the company first sergeants except one, and a number of other experienced noncommissioned officers. This compelled the regimental officers to fill these vacancies with men with less experience and capability. Needless-to-say, this unfortunate development created a vacuum of leadership for the twenty-forth at a particularly crucial time (Haynes 36).

The sum of these conditions made for a relatively tense atmosphere, as 654 black soldiers and 8 white officers departed Columbus, New Mexico and arrived in Houston, Texas "without a hitch." A small crowd of army officers, newspaper reporters, and curious townspeople greeted the soldiers as they detrained shortly before six o'clock on Saturday morning, July 28. As word of their coming leaked out, the number of observers swelled to several hundred and consisted of

as many white as black civilians. Sergeant Vida Henry was acting first sergeant of I Company, 24th Infantry, one of the companies that lost its first sergeant to Officer's Training Camp. First Sergeant Henry was a native of Green County, Kentucky. He was thirty fives years of age and a veteran of thirteen years' military service with I Company. Of "light complexion," muscular and a well-proportion man, who stood erect and weighed nearly two hundred pounds. In every respect he appeared to be a loyal and dedicated career soldier (Haynes 115).

Corporal Charles W. Baltimore was described to be one of the unit's most respected noncommissioned officers. He was a senior member of the provost guard and considered by most to be a model soldier (96).

The practice of "Jim Crow" was commonplace in the south, which made race relations in Houston notoriously poor. The term Jim Crow became a racial slur synonymous with black, colored, or Negro in the vocabulary of many whites: and by the end of the eighteenth century, acts of racial discrimination toward blacks were often referred to as Jim Crow laws and practices ("The History of Jim Crow").

The introduction of the Black soldiers into this situation led to a series of incidents between the soldiers and the police enforcing "Jim Crow" laws. The men of the 24th insisted on the dignity and respect due them as soldiers of the regular Army. They ignored the "Jim Crow" laws, conduct which the police and many Houston citizens viewed as insolence.

The event which triggered the mutiny and subsequent riot was the beating of Cpl. Charles Baltimore by the police when, acting in the role of military police, he attempted to intercede on behalf of a soldier and a woman being arrested by the police. A rumor soon circulated at Camp Logan that Baltimore had been killed and some of the soldiers determined to avenge his death, even after he returned to camp that evening. At this critical time, there was a lack of experienced officers and NCOs in the battalion (Manguso 10) .

On the night of August 23, 1917, weapons and ammunition were taken from the supply tent and about one hundred and fifty mutineers, including Cpl. Baltimore and the acting first sergeant, Sgt Vida Henry, left the Camp, heading for the nearest police station seeking violent revenge. On their march, they fired into buildings and at people they encountered. In all, the mutineers killed 16 people, including a young girl, hit by a bullet as she slept. The mutineers killed five police officers and one National Guard officer mistaken for a police officer. Three mutineers died – one shot accidentally before leaving the camp, a second killed in an exchange of gunfire and the third shot by the mutineers when mistaken for a police officer. Sgt. Henry, wounded during the rampage, left the group and reportedly committed suicide (Manguso 10).

The reaction to the riot was swift. The War Department dispatched additional Regular troops to Houston and the 24th Infantry was disarmed and moved out of the city. A General Court-Martial was convened on November 1, 1917 at Fort Sam Houston because the Commander of the Southern Department, headquartered at Fort Sam, was the General Court-Martial convening authority. They held the trial in the Gift Chapel, the only building on the post suitable for so large a trial—there were 63 defendants. During the trial, the defendants were held in the Post Guard house at the intersection of present-day Stanley Road and New Braunfels Avenue. Charges included mutiny, murder, disobedience to orders and assault with the intent to commit murder. Major Harry Greer, former professor of history and military law at West Point, was assigned as the defense counsel. Though not an attorney (appointment of a lawyer as defense counsel in a general court-martial was not required until 1951), Greer was deemed the most qualified having served in the 24th Infantry as an Inspector General. His efforts were hampered by the defendant's lack of trust in him and their failure to confide in him (10).

When the trial concluded, fifty-eight of the defendants were found guilty and five acquitted. Thirteen defendants were sentenced to death, forty-one to life-imprisonment and the others to

lesser terms. The articles of War prescribed death by hanging for the offense of mutiny. The Department Commander reviewed and approved the verdict and the sentences on Dec 10 and ordered them carried out on Dec. 11. The thirteen sentenced to death were transported to a gallows erected near Salado Creek early in the morning and hanged. They were buried not far from the gallows (Manguso 11).

The defendants had hoped to be shot rather than hanged "like criminals", but the Articles of War in the early 1900s were quite specific; "Death by hanging is considered more ignominious than death by shooting and is the usual method of execution designated in the case of persons guilty of murder in connection with mutiny". While recognizing the severity of the military justice system of the time, the War Department was concerned with the appearance of haste in carrying out the executions. As a result, the War Department ordered that in all cases in the continental United States in time of war when a death penalty was imposed, the sentence would not be carried out until reviewed and approved by the President, thereby establishing the right to appeal (11).

Two additional courts-martial followed because of the mutiny. 55 were charged and 52 convicted. Sixteen were sentenced to death and 12 to life-imprisonment. In the presidential review of the death sentences, which followed, the verdicts were confirmed but ten of them were commuted to life imprisonment. The sentences were carried out in September 1918 and these men were buried with the other near Salado Creek (11).

Although the many pages of documents of the official records clearly indicate the soldiers were abused and mistreated, they also state the law of the land prevailed. As to the guilt or innocence of the mutineers, reference is made to then Secretary of War Baker's letter to President Wilson recommending sentence reductions for the mutineers convicted in the two subsequent courts-martial. Baker stated the trial was without prejudicial error in matter of law

and that the evidence overwhelmingly sustained the judgment of guilty as to all the defendants. He stated further that there can be no doubt that the law of the land prevailed and that justice had been carried out. It was a fair court-martial, carried out strictly according to the manual for courts-martial (Manguso 4-M).

Human undertaking often produces unforeseen consequences. When Sgt Henry and Cpl. Baltimore led the mutineers from Camp Logan that night, they probably knew what the consequences would be for them for their actions. They could not have foreseen that their actions would result in establishment of a right of appeal for soldiers. The saddest effect of the mutineers' violent quest for revenge was that it completely overshadowed the faithful and gallant service of Black Americans during the First World War (Manguso 11).

Works Cited

Haynes, Robert V. A night of violence; the Houston riot of 1917. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, c1976.

Davis, Ronald L. F., *"THE HISTORY OF JIM CROW"*. (2000). 30 September 2002 (http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/creating2.htm).

Manguso, John, "Camp Logan Mutiny, riot put in proper perspective." Express-News, San Antonio, Texas 5 March 1989.

Manguso, John, "The Camp Logan Story – historical perspective." Fort Sam Houston News Leader 30 January 1997: 10.